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BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: ITS HISTORY AND ITS MISSION.

I.

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Late development of Biblical Theology—necessitated by the character of biblical study in the early and mediæval church—Its doctrine of inspiration—the allegorical method of exegesis—Biblical Theology the product of Humanism and the Reformation—The name at first used of biblical dogmatics—The science first clearly conceived by Gabler—The works of de Wette, von Cölln, and Baur.

BIBLICAL theology is the youngest child in the family of scientific theology, but like David, youngest of the eight sons of Jesse, it is destined, in the thought of many, to a royal career in the history of the church, and one signally blessed of the Lord.

It seems, at first thought, singular that biblical theology should have been born so late in the Christian centuries. The church has needed it from the beginning. It was needed, for example, in the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries, when according to Pfleiderer,¹ "there arose a new scholasticism which equaled the old in its want of freedom and in its dry journalism," when the springs of Scripture which had been opened by the reformers were buried again beneath the dogmas and endless confessions of theologians. It was needed through all the long ages of ecclesiastical domination when the spiritual diet of believers, instead of being the bread of God's Word, was the doctrine of the church, which, alas, was often but a stone. It was needed also in the early church, for although there was then a vital connection with the Scripture and a large appropriation of the essential truths of revelation, there was an apprehension of the *development* of revealed religion. Biblical theology has thus been needed from the first, because, as Dr. Schaff says,² "it brings

¹ *Philosophy and Development of Religion*, 1894, p. 75.

² *Theological Propædæutic*, p. 318.

us face to face with the divine oracles in all their original power and freshness." But while deeply needed, biblical theology was impossible until modern times. The way for it must be prepared. A development of biblical theology in the fourth or fourteenth century would be well nigh as inexplicable as the development in either of those centuries of the doctrine of evolution. It would have been a birth out of due season, doomed to a brief and barren career.

For glance but a moment at the character of biblical study in the early and the mediæval church. The exegesis of the illustrious and good men who expounded and defended the Word of God from the second to the fifth centuries with the partial exception of Theodore of Mopsuestia¹ and other members of the school of Antioch, had two characteristics which were radically bad. First, it assumed or claimed that the Bible and even the Septuagint translation, was verbally inspired, and second, it explained, or vainly tried to explain, all Scripture allegorically. It is not necessary to ask in this place whether the idea of verbal inspiration was derived chiefly from Philo and Plato, or was an inference from certain utterances of the Bible concerning itself. It was at any rate the dominant belief, and seriously interfered with the interpretation of Scripture. For it was a corollary of this belief that all parts of the Bible were equally authoritative and every particular supernaturally perfect. There could be no contradictions, no errors, no deficiencies and no development. The human element was not only reduced to a minimum, but that minimum was dehumanized, for there was denied to the biblical authors the natural activity of their faculties in the production of their writings, and by some of the Fathers even self-consciousness was denied to them in the reception of divine teaching. Under the reign of such a conviction it was impossible to have sound principles of interpretation.

This leads us to the second feature of biblical exegesis in the early church, its allegorical method. Here and there a writer saw the evil of this way, but it was practically triumphant. Hatch,²

¹ Died in 428 A.D.

² *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church*, 1892.

Sanday,¹ Farrar² and others tell us that it was borrowed from the Greek habit of interpreting Homer allegorically. We see the method applied already by Philo, who wished to harmonize Moses with Plato, and according to Sanday³ it appeared full-blown among Christians as early as Heracleon, 170 A.D. This method was adopted by Christian scholars in part at least because it afforded a convenient way of elevating the Old Testament to the ethical level of the New, which was required both by their theory of inspiration, and as it seemed to them by the very defense of the Old Testament itself against the charges of gnostics and heathens. Marcion, for example, had declared that there was an irreconcilable conflict between the Old Testament and the New, that the God of the Old Testament was the demiurge, not the good God of the New Testament, and the Fathers saw no method of refuting such charges against the Old Testament except by allegorical interpretation. So this method was dominant in the early Church. Origen developed it, and his canon⁴ that all Scripture has three senses, which correspond to man's body, soul and spirit, became classical and continued in force for centuries.

Appropriately enough, this canon, as far as any Scripture basis was claimed for it, was founded on a misunderstood verse in Proverbs,⁵ which verse, even if it had been rightly understood by Origen, furnished no ground whatever for applying the method to other Scriptures than the Proverbs.

This theory of a threefold meaning subjected the Bible to the caprice of the interpreter. If the literal meaning did not suit, he could turn to the psychical, and if this in turn was unsatisfactory, he could take refuge in the spiritual. By one or the other he was able to make the Scripture agree wholly with his own view.

The results of such exegesis ill accord with the view that the Bible was verbally dictated by the Lord. The following are fair

¹ *Expositor*, XI., 352.

² *History of Interpretation*, 1886, p. 134.

³ *Inspiration*, 1893.

⁴ *De Principiis*, IV. I. ii.

⁵ Proverbs 22 : 20.

illustrations of this exegesis: John tells us that the water-jars in Cana held two or three firkins apiece. This intimates, according to Origen, that some of the Jews were purified by *two* firkins, *i. e.*, the psychical and spiritual sense of Scripture, while others were purified by *three* firkins, *i. e.*, the psychical, the spiritual, and the corporeal sense of Scripture. Tertullian says that the *horns* of the wild ox mentioned in Deut. 33:17 refer to the extremities of the cross.

According to Clement the clean beasts which divide the hoof and chew the cud are the orthodox believers, since chewing the cud means thought, and the divided hoof means stability. On the other hand, those animals which divide the hoof but do not chew the cud are the heretics. The same writer regarded Lot's wife as an allegory to *salt* those who have a spiritual understanding. Such interpretations might be cited by the hour from the Alexandrian writers and also from those of the West, where even the sober Jerome indulges in fantastic allegorical explanations. But while exegesis rested thus on "a foundation of sand" there could of course be no biblical theology.

As we pass from the early to the papal church, and follow the course of history from one century to another, we find a perpetuation of the bad characteristics of early interpretation. The few who had access to Scripture, and who studied it, did so after the manner of the Fathers. There was little acquaintance anywhere with the original languages of the Bible, and little appreciation of the value of such knowledge. The writings of the Fathers and the lives of the saints gradually eclipsed the Word of God. Whatever original study there was followed the allegorizing method of early writers. No commentator rose to the level of Origen and Jerome during the next thousand years, and no one improved on Origen's method of interpretation. In support of doctrine, appeal was taken, not to Scripture, but to the church, and the leaders of the church went back as a rule only to the Fathers. Thus the theology of Isidore of Seville¹ and John of Damascus, and then, after a long and barren period,

¹ Fisher, *History of the Christian Church*, p. 161.

the theology of the early schoolmen, like Peter Lombard, was nothing more than a patchwork from the teaching of the Fathers.

And thus through the mediæval period, as there was no historical exegesis, there could be no biblical theology. The ground was not yet prepared.

What, now, we ask, *was* the preparation for biblical theology? Dr. Schaff has said¹ that biblical theology is a child of German rationalism, though it must not be inferred from this remark that he would thereby cast any reproach upon the study, for he esteemed it most highly. We may call it a child of German rationalism if we mean by this simply that the first men to cultivate it were rationalistic Christians of Germany. But in a far more important sense it was the child of the Humanists and the Reformers. The men who revived the study of Hebrew and Greek, and the men who, whether in a friendly or hostile spirit, turned from the current teaching of the church to the teaching of God's Word—these made the essential preparation for biblical theology. Reuchlin's Hebrew grammar of 1506, which he could truthfully call *Exegi monumentum ære perennius*, and Erasmus' Greek New Testament of 1516 inaugurated a new era in the history of the Bible; and although there remained a stupendous work to be done before biblical theology would be possible, the critical historical study which they began involved the germ of that theology.

The Reformers made the work of the Humanists widely influential. Melancthon expounded the Greek New Testament, and Luther, though he did not claim to be a master of Hebrew and Greek,² translated the Bible out of the original tongues.

The biblical study of the Reformers, as compared with that of the preceding ages deserves to be called critical. They held that the Scriptures should be heard irrespective of ecclesiastical doctrine; that "the Scriptures should not be interpreted by the creeds, but the creeds by the Scriptures." They threw off the incubus of the allegorical method, and began to read the Word of God in a rational manner. They affirmed the right of private

¹ *Theological Propædæutic*, p. 320.

² See Schaff, *History*, vi. 138.

judgment. The rules of interpretation which Luther laid down,¹ though he did not always adhere to them himself, furnished a vastly better foundation than had hitherto been known. This is especially true of the first two of his rules. The first was the necessity of grammatical knowledge. In this he was at one with other Reformers. Melancthon said that to be ignorant of grammar is to be ignorant of theology. This rule of Luther concerning the necessity of grammatical knowledge was in strong contrast with what Origen had said: "Let every one who cares for truth be little concerned about words and language, seeing that in every nation there prevails a different usage of speech."² More dangerous advice than that could scarcely be given. Luther's second rule was to know the times, circumstances and conditions in which the different books of the Bible arose. Here was the recognition of the historical principle which had been thus far practically unknown. The observance and development of this was destined to revolutionize biblical study.

As a part of this historical view of Scripture by the Reformers the human element began to be recognized, and the idea of verbal dictation was rejected. "Luther did not regard divine revelation as a mechanical communication of supernatural knowledge, but as a spiritual development through life." Holding this view of inspiration, he weighed the separate books of Scripture and tested them all by Christ. He admitted the existence of chronological and historical errors and contradictions of an incidental sort.

Germane to this theory of inspiration was the distinction which began to be made by Luther and others between the Scriptures and the Word of God. Thus Luther says in his table-talk: "In the Bible thou findest the swaddling clothes and the manger whither the angels directed the simple shepherds; they seem poor and mean, but dear and precious is the treasure that lies therein." "The Scriptures, said Sebastian Franck, are only the shell and surrounding of the Word of God, which is the kernel, sword, light, sanctuary, spirit and life, fulness and reality."

¹ See Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, p. 332.

² *De Principiis*, IV. I. 27.

These various principles were shared by all the Reformers with more or less of modification. They made a scientific study of the Bible possible, and so made biblical theology possible.

But though the time seemed ripe for the beginning of biblical theology, and was indeed ripe, two centuries passed before a beginning was finally made. The movement of the Reformers was soon paralyzed on its biblical side. Doctrinal discussion carried on in the spirit and with the apparatus of scholasticism absorbed the attention of theologians.

When a reaction from this formal confessionism appeared in the rationalism of the eighteenth century, then biblical theology began to be cultivated. But the *name* "Biblical Theology," which can be traced back at least to Haymann, whose book was published in 1745,¹ was applied at first to mere popular explanation of the proof-texts in use in theology. As Beyschlag says,² it was used to designate biblical-dogmatics in contrast to the scholastic. "Friends of the orthodox doctrine felt that its scholastic form was inadequate and obsolete, and they accordingly sought to revive the doctrines out of the Bible which had been pushed quite into the background." Yet these writers did not deal with the Bible as a whole, but only with the usual proof-texts of dogmatics, the *dicta probantia*. So A. F. Büsching published in 1758 a book entitled "Thoughts regarding the character of Biblical-dogmatic Theology and its superiority to Scholastic Theology." C. T. Zachariä published in 1772 a four-volume work under the name *Biblical Theology, or an Investigation of the Biblical Basis of the Principal Theological Teachings*. Of the same general character was the elaborate book of C. J. Ammon which appeared in 1792. In his introduction he defines biblical theology as *the accurate knowledge of the pure contents of those Scripture passages out of which are derived the doctrines of biblical dogmatics*. Thus he treats only what he calls *the dogmatic parts* of the Old and New Testaments. He bestows much attention on the separation of that which was for the time of the respective author and that which had abiding value.

¹ So F. Delitzsch in unpublished lectures on O. T. theology.

² *Neutestamentliche Theologie*, I. 12.

Other writers of the eighteenth century, as Lorenz Bauer, and Hufnagel, understood biblical theology in this same sense. But all these works, judged by the standard of our century, were not biblical theology save in name. They were only "a popular tabulated dogmatics." They were a protest against the teaching of the church, and were of value in that they insisted on the necessity of a fresh searching of the Scripture.

But while there was no work on biblical theology, properly so called, produced in the eighteenth century, a step forward was taken and the line of demarcation between biblical and systematic theology was at length clearly drawn by J. P. Gabler of Altdorf.¹ He maintained that biblical theology is purely *historical* in character, and thus he elevated it to the rank of an independent department. In a qualified sense, Gabler may be regarded as the father of biblical theology. It is a child of the Reformation in spirit; a child of Gabler in form.

But this conception of biblical theology which was set forth by Gabler was only very gradually realized. The most important work in this department in the first quarter of our century was that of de Wette,² but his *Biblical dogmatic of the Old and New Testaments* was more philosophical than historical. Furthermore, he includes much which does not properly belong to biblical theology, as biblical history, the teaching of the Apocrypha, the rabbis, Philo and Josephus. Neither does he carry very far the principle of Gabler to distinguish the stages of development and the personal types of doctrine.

The work of von Cölln, published in 1836, marks an advance upon De Wette in one particular at least; it seeks to present the teaching of Scripture from the point of view of the respective authors.³ It is thus more truly historical than de Wette's.

Reuss' *History of Christian Theology in the Apostolic Age* (1852) and F. C. Baur's *Lectures on New Testament Theology* (1864) were the next important works. But Reuss' work, like de Wette's, includes a great deal which does not belong to biblical theology,

¹ *De justo discrimine theologiæ biblicæ et dogmaticæ*, etc., 1789.

² *Biblische Dogmatik Alten und Neuen Testaments*, 1813.

³ See Schenkel in *Studien und Kritiken*, 1852.

as the teaching of Clement and Barnabas, and the history of the various religious movements of the Jews. The teaching of Jesus and his apostles is obscured by the mass of extraneous material. Baur held the principle of Gabler, but his work is marred by the critical opinions which he held regarding the origin of the New Testament writings, and by his failure to gain the point of view of the respective authors.